



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza (flu) is a contagious illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the respiratory tract. The illness can be mild to severe and can be fatal in some people. Although anyone can become infected with influenza, the elderly, young children, or anyone with other health problems are at greater risk from developing more severe illness or suffer from the complications of influenza, such as pneumonia. Every year 3,000-49,000 people die of influenza and the complication of the disease.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is spread by respiratory droplets from close contact with infected persons or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. Infection can occur when influenza viruses contact the eyes, mouth, or nose, and possibly through inhaling droplets from a sneeze or cough. Sometimes people may become infected by touching surfaces or objects contaminated with influenza viruses and then touching their eyes, mouth, or nose. Infected adults may be able to spread the virus to others about one day **before** they develop symptoms and up to seven days **after** becoming sick. **That means that you may be able to spread the flu to someone else before you even know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.**

Who is at risk for influenza?

Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, the flu can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people. In the United States, on average 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from seasonal flu-related complications. Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Some people, such as older people, young children, pregnant women, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications.

How do I know if I have influenza?

A health care professional usually diagnoses influenza by looking at your symptoms. Sometimes your nose will be swabbed and tested for the influenza virus.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Symptoms usually include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Muscle aches

Sometimes diarrhea and nausea occurs in children. Symptoms usually start about 1-4 days after being exposed and last 2-7 days.

How can influenza be treated?

Influenza is usually treated with fever reducers, throat or cough drops, water, and plenty of rest. If the diagnosis is made at the very beginning of the illness, a doctor may prescribe antiviral medication.

How is influenza prevented?

The best protection is to get a flu shot every year before the flu season starts. Since influenza viruses change over time, it is important to get a shot each year. Each year the vaccine is remade to include the types of flu virus expected to cause illness during that flu season. The vaccine begins to protect you within a few days after vaccination, but the vaccine is not fully effective until about 14 days after vaccination.

Good respiratory hygiene is important to prevent the spread of ALL respiratory infections, including influenza.

- Use your elbow or upper arm, instead of your hands, or a tissue to cover your mouth and nose or when you cough or sneeze. Immediately throw used tissues into the wastebasket.
- To clean your hands after coughing or sneezing, wash with soap and water, or clean with alcohol-based hand cleaner if water is not available.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- If you get influenza, stay home from work, school, and social gatherings. This will help prevent others from catching your illness and gives your body the rest it needs to recover.

- Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. Many diseases often spread this way.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/> or the ISDH influenza website located at <http://www.in.gov/isdh/25462.htm>.

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